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Papuans and Jokowi are hostage to Indonesian politics

Abstract

Indonesian President Joko Widodo recently announced the end of the decades-long restriction on foreign journalists in the provinces of Papua and West Papua, Indonesia's territories in the island of New Guinea. While the president, popularly called Jokowi, says he is committed to human rights in the Papua provinces, the military and police continue to murder Papuans with virtual impunity.

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Joko Widodo is surrounded by politicians and military generals with agendas that are unlikely to help the Papuans. EPA/Mast Irham

Indonesian President Joko Widodo recently announced the end of the decades-long restriction on foreign journalists in the provinces of Papua and West Papua, Indonesia's territories in the island of New Guinea. While the president, popularly called Jokowi, says he is committed to human rights in the Papua provinces, the military and police continue to murder Papuans with virtual impunity.

Military and police violence

For the military, Papua is central to promotion advantages and their income – the government covers only 25% of the military budget. Corruption and human rights abuses go hand-in-hand with this.

In September 2014, [West Papua Media](#) reported mobile brigade (Brimob) police had shot three men for refusing to shave during raids targeting men with long hair, long beards and dreadlocks. These are seen as symbols of pro-independence supporters who operate in Papua's jungles.

In December 2014, Indonesian military and police [fired into a crowd](#) in the highlands town of Paniai on the western side of Papua. Five teenagers, some in their school uniforms, were killed. Twelve people were injured.

The Paniai region has been the target of escalating brutal crackdowns by the military following the launch of [“Operation Matoa”](#) in December 2011. The operation intended to break a local armed resistance movement. It displaced an estimated 14,000 indigenous Papuans along the way.

In March this year, police [opened fire](#) on a crowd in Yahukimo, West Papua, killing one person and injuring four. This was a peaceful gathering to raise funds for humanitarian aid to victims of Cyclone Pam, which had struck Vanuatu a couple of days earlier.

Though exact figures are in dispute, some sources [estimate](#) that up to 500,000 indigenous Melanesians have been killed under Indonesia’s occupation.

Jokowi’s commitment to human rights in Papua

Jokowi visited Papua twice during his election campaign. In comparison, the former president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, made only three visits during his entire ten years in office.

In August 2014, Jokowi met with 30 Papuan politicians and religious leaders. He planned to have a dialogue with Papuan leaders every three months, either personally or involving key staffers. He promised to follow up the December 2014 killing in Paniai.

Natalius Pigai, a member of the Indonesian Human Rights Commission, Komnas HAM, met Jokowi shortly after the killings and said Jokowi knew of the case and would act. However, nothing has happened so far.

Jokowi has also announced a plan to build a presidential palace on the shores of Lake Sentani near Papua’s capital, Jayapura, a signal of new presidential attention to the Papuan provinces.

When he visited Papua in early May, Jokowi announced the lifting of the ban on foreign media and released five political prisoners who he then met personally. However, between 20 and 30 people remain incarcerated and local journalists are sceptical about the lifting of the media ban, which they regard as window dressing that will still exclude reports of human rights abuse. On this visit, Jokowi also announced a slate of new infrastructure investments in energy, tourism, manufacturing and communications.

Jokowi’s trip to Papua directly presaged his trip to Papua New Guinea, the overt purpose of which was to strengthen economic ties. As with Wayang puppetry, the shadow behind this light was to undermine PNG support for Papuans in West Papua. PNG Prime Minister Peter O’Neill announced his [support](#) for Papuans in February.

Jokowi’s activities in Papua are promising signs. But they remain ambiguous as internal politics continue to intervene.

Internal political struggle

Jokowi is surrounded by politicians and military generals with agendas that are unlikely to help Papua.

Former president Megawati Soekarnoputri, the leader of Jokowi's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), demands Jokowi bow to her wishes. As president, Megawati's platform was driven by a strong conviction that Indonesia's territorial integrity – including West Papua – must be preserved no matter what.

Megawati was a weak president, but she had around her several “strong” but shady political characters, including ex-generals. These strongmen have been forced onto Jokowi in both his election team and cabinet.

The former head of Indonesia's intelligence agency, A.M. Hendropriyono – the alleged mastermind behind the assassination of human rights defender [Munir Said Thalib](#) – was part of Jokowi's team during the presidential election.

Even more harmful for Papua is Jokowi's defence minister, [Ryamizard Ryacudu](#). Ryamizard was Megawati's army chief of staff and was instrumental in a 2003 military operation against the separatist movement in Aceh. The operation involved human rights abuses and wholesale terrorising of the region's civilian population.

Ryamizard believes that violence against civilians is heroic if it is for the sake of unity of the Republic. In response to the report on the 2001 murder of prominent Papuan leader Theys Eluay by Special Forces soldiers, Ryamizard said:

To my mind they (the soldiers) are heroes.

Late last year, Ryamizard publicly argued for greater involvement of the military in civilian life, a return of greater domestic security powers to the military, and reshuffling of the security forces to bring police under the command of the Home Ministry rather than the president. He is for an authoritarian state with increased power for the military, even over the president. Ryamizard is supported by Megawati and the central PDI-P party authorities – Jokowi's political base.

Jokowi's political strength both inside his own party and against the opposition is terribly fragile. He is buckling under the strain.

Jokowi is not motivated by personal image, nor corrupt advantage. But his ability to address human rights abuses in West Papua is compromised. He is deeply embedded in an internal political context that requires he demonstrate the Indonesian value of *tegas* – firmness.

Behind Jokowi is the shadow of Prabowo Subianto, an ex-general with a questionable human rights record. Voters see Prabowo, Jokowi's opponent in the presidential election, as a “firm” leader. Prabowo controls the parliament through the Red and White coalition and is seeking to bring Jokowi down.

Jokowi is also caught in required obeisance to his PDI-P party controllers, who command the way he is “firm” in public. At the PDI-P Congress earlier this year, Megawati told Jokowi to do what he was told and not give in to international pressure in the case of Australian drug smugglers Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran. Jokowi quietly accepted the haranguing and remained publicly “firm”.

Jokowi also capitulated to interests within the party in undermining the highly respected Corruption Eradication Commission, the KPK. This seriously weakened public faith in his firmness in eliminating corruption, a core election pledge.

Jokowi is in a bind of his own making. He is a man of vision and integrity frozen by the politics of his time.

Papua awaits escape from being held hostage to wider Indonesian politics. But escape for the Papuans first requires Jokowi to escape his political shackles in order to deal with human rights abuses in Papua.